

STARSHIP
DOMINATRIX
YOU ARE MINE

By Dustin J. Craig

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Trigger Warning

For Those Who Live in La-La-Land

This story dives into some heavy shit.

Expect violence and strangulation, anti-gay abuse and family rejection, forced bodily mutilation, childhood trauma and witnessed murder, financial exploitation and housing insecurity, and one deeply disappointing can of beans.

This is a standalone story set in the Starship Dominatrix universe, an unapologetically queer space opera series by Dustin J. Craig. If an enemies-to-lovers space adventure beginning with a disputed starship and attempted strangulation sounds like your kind of love story, then welcome aboard. Buckle up, cupcake. You're in for a badass, no-holds-barred, muthafuckin' ride!

Acknowledgments

Thank you to my husband, Glen Bogue, for listening to me read nearly every day while I edit my novels, even when the same paragraph returns for another trial. Thank you for providing the sustenance, nicotine, and caffeine that keep both me and the Starship Dominatrix universe running; for giving me shelter and room to pursue every creative endeavor; and for taking care of me through pain, frustration, distraction, and exhaustion. It would often be easier to kick me to the curb, but you keep choosing patience, kindness, and love instead. I could not do any of this without you.

*For everyone who was made
to feel broken for loving.*

You never were.

VIOLENT VENERATION

Jack walked down the long docking pier of Cythera Station, orbiting Venus, carrying several pieces of luggage and the title to his new ship. His cybernetic left eye scanned the berth labels until he reached Dock 69, where the Bushy Oak Maria waited. He placed the title between his teeth, pulled the access card from his pocket, and slid it through the panel. It didn't work the first two times.

He wiped the magnetic strip on his sleeveless t-shirt and tried once more. The panel flashed green, which he regarded as an ominous beginning to the most expensive day of his life.

Jack pulled the title from between his teeth as machinery awakened beyond the airlock with a reluctant clunk. The door opened halfway and stopped, leaving a gap barely wide enough for him to squeeze through.

He set down his luggage, braced one shoulder against the door, and pushed until the mechanism surrendered with a metallic groan. He could already tell that would be

an expensive repair.

The registry had described the Bushy Oak Maria as operational, but it had said nothing about the smell. Ozone from warm circuitry, unwashed fabric, and something animalistic that Jack found oddly sexual lingered beneath the sharper scent of industrial cleanser. Someone had been living aboard. With the title pressed beneath one arm, he listened for any sign that the life-support system was failing. The ventilation worked, but somewhere deeper inside, a pump cycled unevenly without the grinding undertone of imminent collapse.

The ship was old, ugly, and his.

Years of double shifts, cheap rooms, and instant ramen noodles had become a battered freighter with a titanium hull covered in dents and scratches. He had almost no money left, but he possessed an engine, a cargo hold, and the legal right to take the ship wherever he pleased and repair it however he saw fit (within reason, of course).

Bushy Oak Maria would not remain her name. Jack planned to rechristen her the Dominatrix after he fixed her up, since she would inevitably become his cruel mistress.

Jack lowered his duffel bag and tool case beside the wall. Before he could inspect the registration plate, something massive and muscular moved behind him.

He turned just in time to see a dark, minotaur-like alien emerge from the cockpit. One hand seized the front of Jack's wifebeater T-shirt, lifted him, and threw him across the corridor. His back struck the opposite wall hard enough to drive the breath from his lungs. A panel buckled behind him, the title escaped his grasp, and registration papers scattered across the deck as a second hand closed around his throat.

Behind Jack, the displaced panel settled against a concealed switch. A tiny red light appeared in the darkness behind it, pulsing as the device emitted a quiet beep every twelve seconds.

Brown fur covered shoulders too broad for Jack to reach across with one arm. One heavy horn curved from the alien's broad skull, while the right ended in an old, blunt break. He wore a leather jockstrap and a tight leather harness that barely contained his muscles.

"I want you to explain very carefully who you are and how you got into my ship," the alien said. His deep voice rang steady and controlled like a bell, but his fingers remained locked around Jack's throat.

Jack tried to answer but produced only a strangled sound. He pulled at the alien's wrist, unable to move it, then pointed emphatically at his own throat and mouthed, 'I can't breathe'.

The alien loosened his hand enough for Jack to draw half a breath. "If you want an explanation, you have to let me use my throat hole."

"You are using it now."

"Badly." Jack swallowed against the pressure and pointed toward the papers on the floor. "My name is Jack Kaiden. I opened the airlock with an access card issued by the registry office. The title to this ship is under your left hoof."

The alien looked down. His brow furrowed when he saw the registrar's seal, although he kept his hand around Jack's throat. He released him, and Jack dropped to the floor.

Jack bent forward, coughing. "You could have asked before breaking my windpipe."

"You came in while I was asleep."

"That doesn't make strangling the customary greeting."

Jack crouched and collected the papers. He looked at the alien, who stepped off the page beneath his hoof. Jack put the packet back together and handed it to him.

The alien smoothed a creased corner against his thigh and read the first page twice before looking at Jack. "This title cannot be legitimate. I have lived on this ship for five years, and I've never missed a payment."

Jack straightened and touched the bruise forming around his throat. "I paid the registered owner in full this morning. The transfer was witnessed, recorded, and verified against the vessel identification. If someone sold me a ship he wasn't entitled to sell, I would be delighted to discuss it after you stop treating me as the criminal."

"I have a contract that gives me possession while I complete the purchase payments."

"Then show it to me. If your contract is valid, we have both been cheated."

The alien studied him, then returned the papers. "My name is Talonor. My contract is in my quarters. I will get it after you tell me why the registered owner didn't know anything about it."

"I can't explain an agreement I've never seen. What I can tell you is that the man whose name appears on your contract probably didn't hold the legal title. The registry traced ownership through three previous transfers before accepting mine."

"I paid him every month for five years."

"That proves he accepted your money. It doesn't prove he owned the ship."

Talonor's nostrils flared. Jack expected another attack

and moved closer to his tool case, where several objects might serve as weapons if thrown with conviction. Instead, Talonor turned toward the crew quarters.

Before he could take two hoofsteps, an alarm sounded throughout the ship. The corridor lights changed from white to red as an impact traveled through the deck, followed by a targeting warning Jack recognized from repair-yard tests. Something outside had acquired a weapons lock.

Talonor looked at Jack. "What did you do?"

"I didn't do anything!"

"I didn't do anything either."

"Then the alarm must be celebrating our new friendship."

Another impact interrupted them, stronger than the first. Talonor ran for the cockpit, and Jack followed.

MUTUALLY ASSURED ATTRACTION

"Three Chimera Kyria vessels approaching starboard aft," Talonor said as he dropped into the pilot's seat and disconnected the Maria from station services.

The approaching vessels had angular hulls assembled from mismatched plates of gray alloy. Energy weapons mounted along their narrow profiles charged.

"The controls beside your chair operate the docking clamps. Press both yellow switches together. Do not—"

"Yes, yes. I learned this in grade school." Jack strapped himself into the copilot's chair and pressed both yellow switches. The name Bushy Oak Maria glowed across Talonor's control panel, and Jack added it to the growing list of things he intended to change.

The docking clamps withdrew. The Maria dropped beneath the pier and then accelerated hard. Jack's harness tightened across his chest as Talonor turned the ship through a gap between two cargo structures with barely enough clearance.

"You could have hit those!" Jack said.

"Yeah, well, consider it a blessing we didn't. I'm trying not to get us both killed."

The three Chimera Kyria vessels followed. They were smaller than the Maria and built almost entirely around their engines and weapons, allowing them to close the distance despite Talonor's attempts to use the station structures as cover.

Jack pulled up the engineering display. "I need to know what modifications have been made to the hull."

"I replaced the pressure seals four years ago and added titanium reinforcement to the outer plating," Talonor said. "The ship was built to carry industrial equipment through corrosive atmospheres, but the old seals had deteriorated before I got it."

"What pressure have you tested it under?"

"Forty-two times standard habitation pressure. I couldn't afford a facility capable of testing it beyond that."

Jack checked the structural readings as Talonor dodged another volley. Venus filled the viewscreen ahead. "Chimera Kyria pursuit ships use cheap alloys with poor corrosion protection. If we enter the upper clouds, the sulfuric acid will eat through their hulls and sensors."

Talonor glanced at Venus. "The acid may not breach us, but the heat, pressure, and turbulence could."

"We only need the upper clouds," Jack said. "Their cheap hulls will corrode before ours, and they're too fast to

outrun. We either force them to retreat or die up here.”

“And if you’re wrong?”

“You can throw me into another wall.”

“I’ll remember that.”

Talonor turned the Maria toward Venus and descended into the atmosphere. Yellow-white clouds rushed toward them as he watched the sensors. They were approaching four atmospheres of pressure and battery-acid rain.

Jack monitored the seals and diverted additional power to the cooling system. The clouds swallowed the ship as turbulence pushed against the hull in rolling waves, and static spread across the sensor display. All three enemy signatures remained behind them.

“They’re following,” Talonor said. “I’ll go down another ten kilometers.”

“The reinforcement is holding. The seals are getting warm, but we aren’t losing pressure. Reduce speed before the turbulence rips us apart.”

Talonor reduced the engine output. One enemy ship turned back almost immediately, while the second followed for another moment before its signature climbed toward space. The third continued descending. Its energy weapons began charging again, ready for a kill-shot, but the signal distorted as its sensors failed. The vessel veered sideways through the turbulence, and its corroded hull buckled and ruptured in the clouds.

Jack checked the readings. “The third ship’s hull just failed.”

“The others won’t follow after seeing that,” Talonor said. “But they know we have to come back out, and they may bring more ships before we do.”

Talonor leveled the Maria inside the clouds and put her

on autopilot. The hull groaned under the pressure, but the structural indicators remained within their limits. Above them, the two surviving vessels took up positions beyond the corrosive layer.

Jack loosened his grip on the console. "That bought us time, which is better than being dead, but not as useful as an escape route."

"Great. We can use that time to figure out why they arrived precisely when you came on board."

"We can also use it to figure out what you've been smuggling aboard a vessel that someone sold twice. Until we figure out what the hell they want, we're both talking out of our asses."

'TIL DEBT DO US PART

Talonor retrieved his contract from his quarters and spread it beside Jack's title on the folding table in the cargo bay. According to the agreement, Talonor would own the ship after five years of monthly payments. He had only three months left.

Jack compared the name on Talonor's contract with the ship's ownership records. "Here's the problem. The trader who sold you the ship never owned it. He was leasing it from the real owner, and his contract didn't allow him to rent it out or sell it to anyone else. He promised you a ship he had no legal right to give you."

Talonor leaned across the table and studied the names Jack pointed out. "He told me he had purchased the ship through a private sale and was waiting for the registration office to update its records. According to him, registries this far from Earth often took years to process ownership

changes.”

“That can happen,” Jack admitted, “but he should’ve been able to show you who sold it to him. Instead, he buried you under legal language and hoped you wouldn’t know what to ask.”

“I did ask.” Talonor’s voice hardened. “He told me that if I refused his terms, he would take back the ship. I had already moved everything I owned aboard it, and I had nowhere else to go.”

“He was never going to give you the title,” Jack said. “He planned to keep taking your money until somebody caught him or the real owner took the ship back. My title is legal, but that doesn’t make what he did to you right. Keep the contract, the payment records, and every message he sent you. When we reach Io Station, we’re reporting the asshole.”

“You expect a station magistrate to recover five years of payments from a trader I wouldn’t know where the fuck to begin looking for?”

“No. I expect the report to make screwing over the next person a little harder and give us something to use if we ever find the fuckhead. I’m not promising the law will suddenly become useful just because we ask nicely.”

Talonor drummed his fingers on the table. “You talk as though you plan to stay involved after we leave this atmosphere.”

“At minimum, I need your testimony when someone asks why my new ship came with an unauthorized resident and a Chimera Kyria patrol. I’d rather not begin ownership with charges of theft, smuggling, or conspiracy.”

Talonor stared at him until Jack remembered how little

protection a legal title offered against being strangled.

Jack cleared his damaged throat and rubbed his neck. "I'm going to check on our friends. I think we've discussed ownership enough for the moment."

He returned to the cockpit and checked the enemy's positions. The two ships remained above the clouds. With the atmosphere interfering with the sensors, Jack could see little more than the intermittent signals produced whenever their pursuers swept the region.

Talonor pulled a credit card from the pocket attached to his jockstrap and opened his account history. After several moments, his brow furrowed as he read the same entries again.

"Fuck!" Talonor yelled.

Jack returned to the cargo bay and found him hunched over the card. "What is it?"

"The last three transfers failed," Talonor said. "The payments went through on the first of every month until three months ago. Since then, there hasn't been enough money in the account."

"Were your wages deposited there?"

"Every week. I left on a long-distance security contract three months ago, and the deposits were supposed to continue. The job ended yesterday, but they provided food and lodging, so I had no reason to check."

Talonor opened his deposit history. "My last wage payment arrived shortly before I left. There was no termination notice or explanation."

"They stopped paying you as soon as you were gone?" Jack asked. "Did anyone from the company stay in contact?"

"My supervisor sent instructions through a local

coordinator. I assumed he was slow to answer because of the distance. Apparently, he was ignoring me because he knew I was working for free."

"So when we reach Io, we've got three problems: your stolen wages, the fraudulent contract, and whatever the Chimera Kyria is attacking us over."

"You say that as though accumulating betrayals improves my position."

"It doesn't. I'm separating the problems so we can deal with whichever one is most likely to kill us first."

Talonor closed the display. "Right now, that would be our 'friends' above us."

"Good. We agree on something."

LOVE AT FIRST BITE

The first day beneath the clouds passed in periods of repair work and inactivity. The Maria could maintain its altitude with minimal engine use, but any significant movement risked revealing its position. Talonor shut down unnecessary systems to reduce their detectable output, leaving the ship's lighting subdued and the cargo bay too hot for comfort beneath the Venusian atmosphere.

In the evening, Talonor warmed a can of beans on a hot plate in his makeshift kitchen. He divided the food between two bowls and placed one in front of Jack.

Jack recoiled and picked at the beans.

"I didn't poison it," Talonor said.

"I was trying to identify the variety."

"They're beans."

Jack cautiously tasted them and found that Talonor's description was comprehensive. Hunger made the second

bite easier. Across the table, Talonor ate slowly while studying the contract he had already read several times.

Without the immediate threat of violence, Jack had more opportunity to pay closer attention to Talonor. The broken right horn was impossible to ignore. The break was too deliberate to have happened accidentally. Most of the horn appeared to have been cut through before the remainder was broken away, leaving a broad scar near the base.

"Was your horn damaged in a fight?" Jack asked. "You don't have to answer, but the break looks deliberate." He scooped up another spoonful of beans and ate it.

Talonor stopped eating and stared at Jack, exasperated. He furrowed his brow. His glare cut like knives. He sighed, then went on to explain.

"Among the Vulfgarr, a male who is discovered seeking intimacy with another male is marked by the breaking of his right horn. The practice is meant to make concealment impossible. Anyone who looks at me knows what the mark means, and they judge me for it."

Jack regretted asking. "How old were you?"

"Nineteen. My father caught me sleeping with another male Vulfgarr. He held me down while my uncle sawed most of it off, then broke off the remainder. Afterward, they allowed me to leave with whatever I could carry. That was merciful, considering older traditions were less generous."

Jack set down his bowl. Talonor had described the event as if he had explained it a thousand times before, but the pain still lingered.

"Fuck, man, I'm sorry," Jack said. "I know saying 'I'm sorry' doesn't repair anything, but I understand part of

what it means to be identified before you can decide whether someone is safe or not. I'm gay too. Humans don't break our horns, obviously, but plenty of them still find ways to punish us."

Talonor narrowed his eyes. "How do they identify you?"

"Sometimes we tell them. Coming out of the closet and all. Sometimes they make assumptions because of the way we speak, dress, move, or look at someone. Once someone knows we're queer, you can't make them unknow it. I've lost friends, business contacts, and some family after people learned about me."

"Which family members did you lose?"

Jack looked down at his beans and nudged them around with his spoon. "I had an aunt named Tala, on my biological mother's side. We were never especially close. I kept telling myself that losing someone who already kept her distance shouldn't matter, but it still hurts. She decided that whatever affection she had for me depended on me being someone I'm not."

Talonor thought for a moment. "Your people make the mark invisible, which permits anyone who wishes to hurt you to do so, or to deny that the injury ever occurred? I don't think that's very nice of them."

"I don't think so either. It's just easier to photograph."

Talonor nearly smirked. Jack caught the corner of his mouth move slightly. He accepted that as progress.

Talonor returned to his food. He looked up as he chewed, then swallowed. "Top or bottom?"

Jack nearly inhaled a bean. He coughed it back into the correct passage and stared across the table. "Is that considered an ordinary change of subject among Vulfgarr,

especially at the dinner table?"

"You said humans reveal their sexuality before it's spoken. I wondered if I was right."

"You assessed my preferred sexual position while strangling me?"

"Well, not at that moment. I thought you were a thief. I figured it out later."

Jack laughed despite himself. "Well, I prefer bottom, although I reserve the right to be top when someone assumes he's understood me too quickly."

"That sucks. I prefer top."

"Naturally you do."

"Why do you say that?" Talonor asked.

"Because if you were any more obvious about it, we'd need to broadcast a warning before you entered a room."

Talonor finished his beans. "Tell me, why did you buy this ship?"

Jack ate the last spoonful of beans. "Because I wanted a life that a landlord or employer couldn't revoke." A comfortable silence settled between them. "Why security?"

"I've spent years working security through contractors who needed somebody big and strong. Like me. A coworker asked me about my horn about three and a half months ago. I guess..." He paused, unsure of what to say. "I guess they told my supervisor. That's probably why I lost the job."

Jack grimaced. "That's shitty."

Talonor waved him off. "No bother. I should have kept my big maw shut. But it opens the door for what I really want to do."

"And what's that?"

"Be a bartender."

PROOF OF LOVE

Jack had fallen asleep in the copilot's chair. He hadn't yet claimed a cabin and didn't want to choose one while Talonor's possessions still filled the ship. Sleep had taken him slowly, and then his dreams carried him somewhere he had been trying to escape for more than twenty years.

A heavy hand closed around Jack's shoulder before the dream reached its end. He woke with his heart racing, sweat cooling against his skin, and nearly knocked Talonor's hand away.

Talonor caught his wrist. "You were calling for someone, and it looked like you were having a nightmare. I didn't mean to scare you."

"You didn't scare me. I was already scared. You arrived too late to take credit."

Two cocktail glasses rested on the cockpit console. Talonor picked them up and handed one to Jack.

"What's this?"

"Antimatter Lobotomy. 190-proof Clearfire, 160-proof Blackwake rum aged to perfection, absinthe, blue liqueur, blackcurrant liqueur, lime juice, grenadine, and a little bitter lemon tonic water to top it off. Makes you forget you were even born, but the hangover is brutal."

Jack held his glass and looked toward Talonor, who held the other. He raised his drink, and Talonor did the same.

"Cheers."

Jack sniffed the inviting scent of lemon peel, black fruit, scorched sugar, and something medicinal. He shrugged, then took a sip that was a little too generous. The first taste was almost sweet enough to be pleasant. Then the herbs

turned bitter, the rum turned smoky, and the alcohol arrived like a plasma bolt down the back of his throat.

"Ooh! Hot! Hot! Hot!"

Talonor smiled. "You like?"

"Fuck, man, *you* made this?"

Talonor grinned. "Yep! Learned all forty-two hundred recipes in *The Bartender's Guide to the Galaxy*."

Jack took another, more cautious sip. He leaned back and closed his eye while Talonor remained beside his chair.

"Does it happen often?" Talonor asked.

"What does?"

"The nightmares."

Jack bowed his head. "Most nights. But it's happened so often that I can usually go back to sleep without discussing it."

"It sounded like you were calling out for someone."

Jack opened his eye again. "Don't you think that's a little intrusive?"

"I was just asking."

Jack sighed. "It was someone I loved. I watched him be murdered in front of my eyes, back when I still had both of them. Every night since then, the nightmare has been playing on repeat just in case I somehow failed to understand it the first several thousand times."

Talonor sat in the pilot's chair instead of looming over Jack. He rolled the stem of his glass slowly between his fingers. "Trauma does that, even to the bravest warriors of my people. It's the mind's attempt to remain prepared for an attack that has already ended."

"I'm not a warrior. I was just a kid."

"But you survived, didn't you?"

Jack looked toward the darkened clouds beyond the cockpit window. "I probably would have died with him. That's how I lost my eye." He pointed to his cybernetic implant.

Talonor bowed his head and swirled his drink. "I can stay awake for a while. If the nightmare comes back, I'll wake you again."

"You don't owe me that."

"We can figure out who owes each other what once the ship's someplace safer."

Jack was about to refuse. Accepting care from someone he barely knew felt reckless, but he also wanted to sleep. Exhaustion settled the argument before pride could finish presenting its case.

"If I start shouting, wake me before I reach the end," he said. "I already know how it ends."

FALLING IN LOVE

Jack sat quietly in the sectional inside the cargo bay. He accidentally hit the window with his foot. The window squeaked. He played *Pretty Princess Power Ponies: The Gems of Destiny* when he became painfully aware of a beep repeating every twelve seconds. At first, he mistook it for one of the Maria's many minor complaints. It was too quiet for an alarm and too regular to be the hull expanding.

"Hey, Cowboy, what the fuck is that beeping?"

"I thought it was coming from something you brought on board."

"All I've got are clothes, tools, and a few comic books," Jack said. "Nothing that should be announcing itself to the entire galaxy. Does any of your shit have some kind of

malfunction?"

"No."

"Of course not. What a stupid question."

Talonor shrugged. "Well, let's figure out where it's coming from."

"Yeah, before we're at each other's throats again."

They listened until the sound repeated, then followed it through the ship, pausing after each beep to judge its direction. It grew louder near the panel Talonor had damaged with Jack's body. Jack removed the fasteners and pulled the panel away.

A small black device occupied a recess behind it. A red indicator pulsed in time with the next beep. Fine cables connected it to the ship's power and communications systems. The surrounding brackets had been professionally installed and were much newer than the wall itself.

Talonor crouched beside Jack. "I've opened the panels on both sides, but never this one. It wasn't on the ship's plans. Whoever hid that thing built a fake wall around it."

Jack inspected the casing without touching it. "I recognize the hardware architecture. Chimera Kyria systems use this kind of interface. Fuck, man. This is a locator beacon, and it might do other shit too. When you gave me that *generous* introduction, I must have hit the switch and caused it to transmit."

"Then it *was* you who summoned the ships."

"After you threw me into the wall. If we're assigning responsibility, we may need a bigger ledger."

Talonor's irritation faded. "The trader had some repairs done before I moved in. He said they were included in the price because the ship couldn't pass inspection without them."

Jack looked back at the beacon. "The timing fits. Those ships appeared almost immediately after you threw me into this wall, and this thing seems to have started transmitting after the impact. Unless the Chimera Kyria somehow happened to find us at exactly the same moment, this is probably what led them here."

Talonor frowned. "Probably?"

"I'm not betting the ship on certainty yet. But it's the best explanation we have. The trader may have planted it, or someone could have slipped it in during the repairs. Either way, if we destroy it now, they'll know we found it and keep waiting for us to come out."

"Can we change the signal and send it away from the ship?"

"Possibly, but I don't know much about AI technology beyond recognizing it," Jack said. "I've always made a point of not touching the stuff. We need to make the signal stop in a way the Chimera Kyria already expects."

Talonor studied the device. "A ship staying in this atmosphere will eventually fall, right?"

"Yeah?"

"If the beacon stopped transmitting during a hull rupture, they might think the pressure destroyed us."

Jack stared at him. "Wait. That's...actually brilliant. The four crew cabins can be independently ejected, right?"

"Yeah?"

"And there's an independent titanium bulkhead between the cabins and the rest of the ship, right?"

"Yeah?"

"We move the beacon into one of them and rig it to overload when the cabin ejects," Jack said. "The energy discharge will look like a system failure. The cabin's own

transponder and heat signature will still look like part of the Maria on their sensors for a few seconds, and when it ruptures, the hull fragments will give them wreckage to track. Then we cut the engines and let the Maria fall like she's dead."

"That would destroy the ship!"

"Not if we restart the engines before the pressure reaches forty-two atmospheres. By then, we'll be deep enough that the Chimera Kyria won't be able to detect us through the clouds. We level off, circle away from where they last saw us, and find another route back into space."

"You want the ship to play dead?"

"Exactly. We're going to make like a three-hundred-ton possum."

"What's a possum?"

"An ugly little animal that survives danger by pretending to be dead."

Talonor looked around the battered cargo bay. "Before we do anything hasty, let me get my shit out of the crew cabin."

They set the plan in motion. Jack transferred the beacon into the cabin and connected it to the ejection system while Talonor removed everything he owned from the room. They entered the cockpit and strapped in.

"What if something goes wrong?" Talonor asked. "What if we get crushed into paste?"

"Explosive compression. Not crushed."

"That isn't reassuring."

The internal doors sealed, and Talonor pressed the controls. A violent impact shook the Maria as the crew cabin tore free. The engineering display reported a brief pressure loss before the titanium bulkhead sealed the

opening.

They watched the beacon descend through the clouds while Jack cut power to the engines. The lights and displays went dark around them, leaving only the emergency systems and Jack's cybernetic eye illuminated. Several seconds later, the cabin's transponder flickered, the beacon's signal flared brightly on the display, and both vanished as the detached cabin ruptured, its hull scattering like ash in the clouds.

The Maria began to fall. Jack's stomach lifted as the ship approached weightlessness, and he kept his eye on the external pressure as it climbed. Beside him, Talonor watched the intermittent signals from the Chimera Kyria ships above. They circled once, then twice, before climbing out of Venus' atmosphere and back into space. Shadow rifts cracked open ahead of them, and the ships disappeared.

The Maria hadn't even reached forty-two atmospheres.

Talonor punched the engines back on. The ship shuddered as he arrested their descent, but he held them at their current depth rather than immediately climbing toward space.

"You think they bought it?" Jack asked.

"They're gone, aren't they?"

"Let's stay down here for another hour before we leave atmo."

"What are we supposed to do for an hour?"

Jack glanced at him. "We could argue about who owns what's left of the ship."

"I thought we settled that."

Jack smiled. "I wasn't talking about the ship."

A MATCH MADE IN VENUS

Talonor set a course for Io Station. During the journey, they repaired what they could, documented the beacon installation, and avoided discussing what would happen after they arrived.

Once the Maria was secured to the station and the docking clamps had finished cycling, Jack found Talonor's duffel bags and reinforced footlocker beside the airlock.

"What the fuck is this?" Jack asked.

Talonor fastened his weapons to one of the bags. "Everything I own. I'll give my statement to the magistrate, find work, and look for somewhere to live. You paid for the ship, and the trader had no right to sell it to me. I can be angry about what happened without making you pay for it."

"You have three months of stolen wages, an empty account, and no place to go. We also have a hidden beacon, three Chimera Kyria ships that tried to kill us, and a trader who may be responsible for all of it. Walking away before we understand any of this isn't noble. It's fucking stupid."

"And staying would make me what?" Talonor asked. "A guest aboard the home I spent five years buying? Someone you feed and tolerate because you feel sorry for him? I know what pity sounds like, Jack. I heard enough of it after my horn was broken."

"This isn't about your horn, and I don't pity you. You know how to fly the Maria, you installed half her modifications, and neither of us would have escaped Venus alone. I need help with the ship, and you need somewhere to stay while we sort out this mess. That isn't charity. It's two people making use of a bad situation."

Talonor lifted one of the duffels. "You need a pilot and a mechanic who will work for food because you can't afford to hire either one. That doesn't mean you want me here."

The accusation struck closer than Jack wanted it to. "You've already decided what I think, so why are we even having this conversation? Go find another employer who won't pay you and another landlord who'll sell your home while you're still living in it. You seem to have excellent instincts for both."

Talonor's nostrils flared. "Fuck you, Jack."

"Yeah. Fuck you too, Cowboy."

Talonor opened the airlock, carried his bags onto the docking pier, and returned for the footlocker without looking at Jack. He carried it across the threshold and walked away while Jack stood inside the Maria, furious that Talonor had misunderstood him and even more furious that he had given Talonor every reason to.

Talonor had nearly reached the end of the docking pier when Jack stepped through the airlock.

"Wait!"

Talonor stopped and looked back.

"You can't leave," Jack said.

Talonor started to object, but Jack lowered his voice.

"You have no job, no money, and nowhere to go. We still need to find the trader, recover your wages, and figure out why someone hid Chimera Kyria technology aboard this ship."

"Those are reasons for me to remain on Io Station," Talonor said. "They aren't reasons for me to stay with you."

Jack opened his mouth with another practical argument

ready, but none of them answered what Talonor had actually said. He glanced back toward the Maria's open airlock.

"Fine. I don't need a pilot. I can hire someone if I need help with the ship, and we can investigate this mess without living together." Jack met Talonor's eyes again. "I want you to stay because I want you on our ship."

"Our ship?"

"I don't know what the fuck this is yet, but I know I don't want it to end with you walking away."

Talonor's grip loosened around the handles of his bags. "You met me two days ago."

"I know. It's been a very confusing two days."

"I won't stay because you feel sorry for me."

"Good, because I'm not offering charity. I'm asking you to come back."

"What are you saying?"

Jack exhaled. "I'm saying I need you, asshole."

Talonor said nothing.

Jack lowered his eye. "You shouldn't lose your home because some bastard cheated you. You deserve time to recover your wages and find the trader without worrying about where you'll sleep." He hesitated. "And I need someone to...to help me with my nightmares."

Talonor looked toward the station, then back at the open airlock behind Jack.

"For how long?"

Jack glanced away. "Just a few days."

"And if it takes longer than that?"

"Then just an eternity."

Author's Note

This story is set on August 7th, 2589 CE, five years before the events of Book One of the *Starship Dominatrix* series. It's an unapologetically queer space opera series by Dustin J. Craig. Jack and Talonor's journey—and all the laughter, heartbreak, triumphs, and wormholes that come with it—is waiting for you.

About the Author

Dustin J. Craig is a gay science-fiction author, comic creator, illustrator, and graphic designer from Utah. He created the Starship Dominatrix universe, where queer romance, artificial intelligence, found family, moral ambiguity, and absurd humor collide across novels, comics, music, and virtual worlds. He lives with his husband and cat.

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Meanwhile...

"Sir? Sir! You need to see this."

Commander Audrey Shaw at Washington Defense Command looked up as an intelligence officer rushed into her office and handed her a DataPad.

"What happened?"

"The Bushy Oak Maria. The vessel our pursuit team destroyed over Venus."

Shaw glanced at the report. "What about it?"

"The compromise beacon that triggered the response belonged to Agent Jakob Graves. He worked clandestine transport operations in the outer Sol System."

Shaw looked up from the DataPad. "Didn't Graves die of a heart attack seven years ago?"

"Yes, sir. He died aboard the Maria while transporting classified cargo. The device hidden inside the ship was an emergency compromise beacon. If Graves was captured or believed the cargo was about to fall into enemy hands, he was supposed to activate it manually. That would transmit the ship's location and authorize the nearest Chimera Kyria unit to destroy it before anyone could recover what he was carrying."

"So it was a suicide pill."

“Essentially. Except Graves never used it. He died before the mission was compromised, and the ship was later found drifting without power.”

Shaw scrolled through the old operation. “What happened to the cargo?”

“That’s the problem. The trader who found the ship took it and sold it through the black market. Intelligence traced most of it, recovered what mattered, and closed the operation six years ago.”

Shaw stopped scrolling. “Then why the hell did it activate today?”

“Someone aboard the Maria must have discovered the compartment or activated the switch accidentally. Either way, they almost certainly had no idea what it was.”

“Who was aboard?”

“A Vulfgarr named Talonor and a civilian mechanic named Jack Kaiden. Neither has any known connection to Graves or the original operation.”

Shaw lowered the DataPad. “So somebody stumbled across a seven-year-old button, pushed it, and we killed them for it?”

“The pursuit team had no reason to question the signal. It authenticated properly, Graves’ destruction authorization was still active, and nobody ever removed the order after he died. When the cargo was recovered, apparently nobody remembered the beacon was still aboard the ship.”

Shaw rubbed her forehead. “Jesus Christ! This is a nightmare.”

“That’s why I came straight to you. If this gets reviewed, someone is going to find the whole chain.”

Shaw read the destruction report again. As far as the

pursuit team knew, they had completed their mission.

"Deactivate Graves' authorization and check the rest of the old operations for anything similar. I don't want another one of these sitting around waiting for someone to press the wrong button."

"Yes, sir. What do you want me to do about the Maria?"

Shaw looked at the names on the report again. "Seal Graves' operation. The public record says the Bushy Oak Maria was lost during a classified military incident near Venus."

The officer frowned. "And Graves?"

"Dead seven years ago. Let him stay that way." Shaw handed the DataPad back and returned to the patrol deployment on her HoloConsole. "Fix the mistake. Bury the rest."